

STATEMENT OF DR. HERBERT C. FROST, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, NATURAL RESOURCES STEWARDSHIP AND SCIENCE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION, OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING H.R. 706, A BILL TO ESTABLISH THE BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK, TO DEDICATE THE PARK TO JOHN H. CHAFEE, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

July 23, 2013

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 706, a bill to establish the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park, to dedicate the Park to John H. Chafee, and for other purposes.

The Department supports H.R. 706.

H.R. 706 would establish a new unit of the National Park System, the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park (Park) within the existing, bi-state, Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Corridor) that extends from Worcester, Massachusetts, to Providence, Rhode Island. The bill directs the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) to establish a park boundary after acquiring a sufficient amount of land or interests in land containing the historic resources to constitute a manageable park unit. The bill allows the Secretary to include in the boundary resources that are subject to a cooperative agreement with either of the two states or their political subdivisions. It authorizes the Secretary to enter into cooperative agreements with nonprofit organizations, including the coordinating entity for the Corridor, as well as state and local governments, for the purpose of collaborating on programs, projects, and activities that further the purposes of the Park. It also permits the acquisition of up to 10 acres in Woonsocket, Rhode Island for the development of facilities for the Park.

The bill directs the Secretary to complete a General Management Plan for the Park within three years after funds are made available. Among other things, the plan must seek to make maximum practicable use of certain named visitor facilities in the Corridor that are operated by Corridor partners, many of which were developed with significant investment of federal funds. The bill also allows the Secretary to provide technical assistance, visitor services, interpretive tours and educational programs to sites outside the boundary of the Park that are within the Corridor. And, the bill dedicates the Park to former Senator John H. Chafee and requires the Secretary to display an appropriate memorial to him.

Finally, the bill amends the authorization for the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor to provide for a non-profit organization, the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, Inc., to be the local coordinating entity for the Corridor. This entity would assume the responsibility for coordinating activities for the Corridor that have rested with the Blackstone River Valley Heritage Corridor Commission since the National Heritage Area was first established. The new coordinating entity would be eligible to receive National Heritage Area funding for through the end of fiscal 2016.

H.R. 706 reflects the findings of the special resource study that the National Park Service (NPS) completed in accordance with Public Law 109-338, which directed the NPS to conduct the study to “evaluate the possibility of (A) designating one or more sites or landscape features as a unit of the National Park System; and (B) coordinating and complementing actions by the [Corridor] Commission, local governments, and State and Federal agencies, in the preservation and interpretation of significant resources within the Corridor.” The NPS consulted with Native American tribes associated with the Blackstone River Valley in the preparation of the study.

The study evaluated a broad range of sites, features and resources throughout the Blackstone River Valley and concluded that the following meet the criteria for designation as a unit of the National Park System: Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark district in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, the historic mill villages of Ashton and Slatersville in Rhode Island, and Hopedale and Whitinsville in Massachusetts; the Blackstone River and its tributaries; and the Blackstone Canal. The study also evaluated various management alternatives with different scopes and levels of NPS involvement. The preferred alternative was a new unit of the National Park System that consists of these sites and features, and that would partner with the coordinating entity for the Corridor and others to undertake the protection and interpretation of these resources.

If established based upon the management alternative recommended in the study, we estimate that the cost to create the Park would be \$6.1 million in one-time expenditures on research, planning, construction and/or rehabilitation, and exhibits, and \$4.8 million for land acquisition, including preservation easements. When the Park is fully established, operational costs are estimated to be \$2.6 million annually for salaries, supplies and equipment. All funds would be subject to NPS priorities and the availability of appropriations.

Several important provisions appear in this legislation that reflect changes to last Congress’ version of this legislation. We appreciate that this legislation now includes a matching requirement for the expenditure of Federal funds under cooperative agreements, authority to acquire land for administrative purposes in Woonsocket, where the NPS currently has office space, and an appropriate recognition for Senator John H. Chafee’s role in preserving the resources of the Blackstone River Valley that does not set a precedent in naming the park for a congressional sponsor, as the previous version would have done.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.